

# Muslim Relationship with Sinhalese in the History of Monaragala (Wellassa) District, Sri Lanka

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## Abstract

The Monaragala District, which named as Wellasaa by its ancient residents, is one of 22 electoral districts of Sri Lanka. Monaragala is located in South Eastern part of Sri Lanka and it is one which of two districts located in Uva Province, with 5639<sup>2</sup> KM terrain extension. In Monaragala, Sinhalese are the dominant group which comprises 94.5% of the total population, Tamils 3.3% and the Muslims 2.17%. Monaragala is a predominantly Buddhist district. However, the other religions such as Islam, Hinduism and Christianity are also being practiced. The members of all communities lived in peace and harmony with social integration with one another. The main objective of this paper is to explore the Muslim relationship with the Sinhalese through the history of Monaragala district. In order to carry out this research there has been used the folktales and utterances prevailed among the native public and also used published and unpublished sources.

**Keywords:** History, Monaragala District, Wellassa, Relationship, Sinhalese, Muslims.

## 1. Introduction

The Monaragala District, which called as Wellasaa by its ancient residents, is one of 22 electoral districts of Sri Lanka, located in South Eastern part of Sri Lanka. It is one which of two districts located in Uva Province and it has a terrain extension of 5639 Sq KM. The geographical land space is 2<sup>nd</sup> to the largest district in Sri Lanka next to Anuradapura district (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012). It is bordered by Ampara on the East, by Badulla on the North, by Ratnapura on the West and by Hambantota on the South. This district has 03 electoral divisions and 11 divisional secretariats. So far it has not been given an urban council or municipal council positions. This district was created as a separate unit after 1958 (Gwillim Law, 2010). Before that it was under the jurisdiction of Badulla district. The capital city of the district is Monaragala.

In Monaragala the Sinhala-Buddhists are the dominant group which comprises 426762 of the total population, Tamils 11997 and the Muslims 9809 (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012). The members of all communities lived in peace and harmony with social integration with one another. Particularly, the Muslims with Sinhalese have been maintaining a better relationship since historical period onward. They have been living with mutual understanding and co-existence with good will and tolerance among the Buddhist majority community for many centuries while having faith in maintaining their religious, cultural and traditional practices. On the above backdrop, the main objective of this paper is to explore the Muslim relationship with the Sinhalese through the history of Monaragala district, Sri Lanka. In order to achieve the objective of this research there has been used the both primary and secondary sources such as folktales and utterances prevailed among the native public in Monaragala area.

## 2. Population Distribution of Monaragala

According to the department of census statistics report of 2012, the total population is 451058 in Monaragala District and of these 97.7% rural and 2.3 estate. Since 1958 it has been maintaining separately the population statistics of the Monaragala which is a district attached earlier with Badulla District. Sinhalese are the major ethnic group in this district, constituting 94.5% of the district total population. The major ethnic group is Tamils and it constitutes 3.3. The Muslims are the second largest, constituting 2.17% of the district total population (Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka, 2012). There are 11 total Divisional Secretariats in Monaragala, and of these divisions the Muslims are distributed in 06, namely Bibile, Medagama, Wellawaya, Buttala, Badalkumbura and Monaragala. Of these divisions, the most of Muslims of respective district live in Medagama, constituting 4939 people. Also, there are 05 villages of 1324 total villages of Monaragala where there the Muslims are living as majority then the Sinhalese. Likewise, there are some other villages and hamlets where

there Muslims live as minority. There are a few Muslim residents existed in other 06 D.S. divisions of total 11 divisions of the district, namely Katharagama, Thanamalvila, Madulla, Siyambalanduwa and Sewanagala.

### **3. Monaragala (Wellassa) in Ancient Time**

The history reveals that Wellassa (Monaragala) region was very famous in the earliest time. The visits of Aryans and king Dutugemunu, and the activities of Huntsmen (Veddhas) are the instances to prove this view. In 6 B.C. the arrivals and colonization of Aryans, who are ancestors of Buddhists in Sri Lanka, have taken place in Sri Lanka. Many Aryan groups have come to Sri Lanka from western and Eastern regions of India through the ocean routes as well as land routes from India (Educational Publications Department, 1992). Aryans have settled down near the Village of Malwattha Oya River. In the course of time, the increase in Aryans population and lack of water for use from the river, have forced the Aryans to have shifted to the other river villages and settled down in other river villages areas. Accordingly settlements were established in the North West Malwattha Oya and Galoya river regions and as well as in the Eastern region of Mahaweli Gange and in the South Eastern regions of Manikka Gange, Kirinthe Oya, and Kumbukkane Oya river areas. Of these colonization regions Manikka Gange and Kumbukkane Oya are the rivers running across Uva and Wellassa.

Besides, The Mahawamsa (a historical book written in Pali language of the Kings of Sri Lanka) revealed the facts that there were Aryan settlements in the region of Mahiyangane, Vinthanne, Siristhawattu, Katharagama and Digawapi and these settlements were taken place after 5 B.C. The areas of Mahiyangane and Katharagama are coming within Uva region. Uva is another region next to wellassa and presently it is a province which consisting Badulla and Monaragala districts. There are 12 regions that give evidences for the periods of their settlements before the beginning of written history of Sri Lanka. Rawana-Ella and Buttala are two areas included in those regions (Educational Publications Department, 1992). Rawana-Ella is located on the main route of Monaragala-Bandarawela. A big waterfall is also there with the same name. So the Uva and Wellassa regions are to give information relevant to Pre-historic periods indicating their ancient status. Wellassa is a region of the ancient residents of Veddhas (Huntsmen). This point of view is emphasized by Noor Yalman (1971) that, "Wellassa is a resident of ancient Veddhas". Mahawamsa also says that king Dutugemunu (B.C 161-137) had established pleasant contact with the region of Uva and Wellassa. This information is available in the chapter under the heading of 'The Victory of Thusta Gamy'. He had a record of reaching Mahiyangane. There he fought against a man 'Santhan' who was a Tamil, and was defeated and killed. After that he came to 'Amthittakam'.

Dutugemunu at a time of good omen with a big strong army force started from Magama, travelled along the old route ran from Magama to Buttala (Monaragala) and on the way he destroyed the ports of Ellalan located along the banks of Mahavali Gange completely. At last in order to capture the Vijithapura part, Dutugemunu stranded to make preliminary arrangements to fight, and after he won the war (Mahavamsa, pp. 263-264). Beside these, there are evidences to show why and how the travelled along the route of Buttala. The people in this area have a folktale that king Dutugemunu had travelled along the Udagamgoda route passing through Bakinigahawela in Monaragala. Also through this route the ancient people as well as travellers and traders used to go to Kandy in historical and maritime periods. Therefore, the history of Sinhalese (Buddhists) in Monaragala district embarked on with the visiting of Aryans who were the first to come to this region. The huntsmen (Veddhas) are the ancestors of the Sinhala-Buddhists and Dutugemunu is a well known Sinhala king in the history of Sri Lanka.

### **4. Muslim Relationship with Sinhalese in the History of Monaragala (Wellassa)**

The Muslims settled down in Wellassa or Monaragala region during the regime of Portuguese (1505-1656) in Sri Lanka. The Muslims moved from Central (Kandy) and Southern Provinces of Sri Lanka and enlarged their population distribution gradually during the regimes of Dutch (1656-1796) and British (1796-1948) (Razick, 2007). Trading was the main reason for the settlement of the Muslims in Monaragala. Professor Cader (1997) says that during the period of middle age (1500 A.D.) there was a commercial link between the Kandyan kingdom and the Eastern province of Sri Lanka. In the attains of commercial activities increasing position of participation of this Muslims have taken place. This association regarding the trades and commerce was found easy through Wellassa (Monaragala) region.

During the time of Portuguese regime coastal Muslims were ill-treated badly. Therefore the Muslims evacuated from the coastal areas in 1526 at once. The 2<sup>nd</sup> time the Muslims again were sent out by the Portuguese in 1626 (Ameen, 2000), then the Muslims started moving to Wellassa region which was a region under Kandyan kingdom. In 1600s, the Kandyan kingdom was ruled by the king Senerath (1604-1635 A.D). The king Senerath had received these evacuated Muslims in Kandy and sent them to the areas of Wellassa. They had gone to Kotabowa and Pangaragama and to Batticaloa, and Irakkamam. These were 4000 Muslims sent to Batticaloa alone (Shamsudeen Moulana, 1997). As a result that the routes leading to Wellassa became popular and the movements of the people including Muslims also became increased. The Muslims were able to settle down in Wellassa as the Kandyan kings had full confidence in the Muslims. There are good documents available

to show that Kandyan kings have extended their full support to the Muslims for peaceful life. The following Kandyan kings have shown their friendship to the Muslims. Rajasinha I (1581-1592), Senarath (1604-1635), Rajasinha II (1635-1658), Wimaladarmasuriyan II (1687-1707), Keerthi Rajasinha (1741-1747). Of these kings, king Senarath has a special place in the contribution of services to the Muslims. King Senarath has given shelters and support as friend (Makeen, 2001).

The Wellassa region was a famous forest and safe land area. It was called as 'the soil that protected king'. This special concept is also attributed to Wellassa. Besides, the forest area so-called Thambathenna adjacent to Bakinigahawela (majorly Muslims living village) is a place where protected Rajasinha I (1581-1592) (So-called 'Sinhala king' by the Wellassa Muslim residents) with the help of Muslims, as viewed by the Muslim residents of Bakinigahawela and remembered even today.

According to the history Kandyan king Rajasinha II donated a large space of land this called Pangaragama to the Muslims in Uva region. There is a view that the Muslims have settled down to Wellassa areas, significantly to Kotabowa from Pangaragama as it is close to Mahiyangana located in Uva province (Razick, 2007). Najmudeen (2002) says that "In order to safeguard the life of the Kandyan king Rajasinha II a Muslim woman had sacrificed her life; an event became important in the history. Also there was a conflict between Sinhalese and Portuguese in Uva. In that event king Rajasinha II in order to escape from the attack went to Pangaragama village and disappeared by hiding in a wooden cave. The Portuguese army that chased behind the king Rajasinha II came across to meet a Muslim lady drawing milk from a cow. They asked her to tell them the whereabouts of the king (Rajasinha II), but she did not reveal it and kept secretly. So the Portuguese warrior killed her. In order to respect the lady's sacrifice of her life the Kandyan king donated the Pangaragama land to the Muslims as a mark of honour to that lady".

In the middle ages, the Wellassa (Monaragala) Muslims maintained a better relationship with Kandyan kingdom and its Sinhalese people. There are many evidences for this such as ancient family names and descendant names. Besides some of the Muslims are having their names with the surname as Pelwaththegedara Mudiyansele, Herath Mudiyansele, Disanayaka Mudiyansele, indicating their Kandyan Sinhalese descents. For example, Disanayaka Mudiyansele Segu Madar Pakeer Saibo Sithy Fareeda Umma, Herath Mudiyansele Siddeque Muhajireen are the names found in large numbers in Wellassa. Besides, the post names of Kandy were also assigned to the Muslims in this area. As the post of Muhandiram was awarded to the person called by name as Hajji, so even today in history books, he is mentioned as Hajji Muhandiram. He had connections mostly with Wellassa (Salsabeel, 2001). The estate supervisors were called in Tamil as 'Kariyathikari', so they were called as Kariyapperuma in Sinhala. Later on this name is deviated as 'Kariyappar'. This was an important big post of the British rule, but these names were created by the Sinhala kings when the Kandyan kingdom alive. These posts were given to the Muslims of Wellassa region by the Sinhala kings. And also some more other posts were given to the Muslims such as Gammuladaniya, Town Arachi, Ralahami, Madige Vidana and Costapal. In 1925 Pakeer Saibo was occupying the post of Costapal and Madige Vidana Appa was in the post of Vidana attached to the Vidana institution for a long period.

The age old man called Abdul Kuthoos Lebbai (1916- 2008), has said that 04 persons from Akurana in Kandy came to Bakinigahawela Of these 04 people Wappukkandu Maraikkar-the father of Segumadar is also one. Before the arrival of this group, there were Muslims living here as a society. Having come to know this matter they have come here and later on started to live with the people of Bakinigahawela. These settled people have received donation of 360 acres of land from the Sinhalese. Of these 360 acres, 03 portions were included in the area of Udagamgoda Panguwa, Moragahamada Panguwa and Walawwatha Panguwa. To these 03 Panguwa areas, 03 Rala Lords were appointed by the Sinhala king. They contributed them level best and sincere services and loud supports to the Kandyan kingdom and the kings. To these 03 areas, 03 Rala Lords were appointed and these areas were given to these Ralas as reward. So later on the Muslims come to have colonization widely. Besides, in 1800, Segu Mathar, Meera Sahibu Appa, Wappukkandu Marikkar, Meera Sahibu Abdullah Mathicham, Periya Thambi Mathicham, Ali Uthuman Mathicham, these Muslims were appointed as societal leaders by the king. This is how the Muslims have been maintaining the relationship with Sinhalese along the history till date from their early settlements in this region.

## 5. Conclusion

Taking all in all, it can be said that the Muslims of Monaragala district, from the time of Portuguese regime, settled down in Monaragala. From that period onwards they have reached a stage of historic appreciation and they could maintain their social status and the history of which has come to display their integrity and cohesion which stands as an example, particularly with the Sinhalese people. For many centuries the Muslims of Monaragala (Wellassa) district have been peacefully living among the Sinhalese majority community with maintaining their religious and cultural practices. In this way, they were living at the same time with the Sinhalese majority community with mutual understanding and co-existence with good will and tolerance. These are the significant features of their traditional history in the history of Monaragala.

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